The Least Among You

Edward Collier

1

The weak daybreak of November peeked between the mountains of the Rassvet valley. The village situated within was a moderately sized grouping of poorly insulated izbas. The instant day broke, it teemed with the fiery footsteps of its angry population. The first snow coverage of the season quickly melted away in their tracks.

Of the 3 church buildings in the village, only one of them had received any attention in the past half-decade. This day was no different. The tracks of the villagers converged on the now-deceased Sergei Seymour's church. His body, already cold, lay in an incomplete coffin on the exact spot from where he spoke to his congregation a mere 2 days prior.

The family and dedicated followers of Seymour had prayed with one another in the company of their late steward's body all night. When those many considered outsiders began filing into the pews for the official funeral, an impudent murmur spread. Sharp looks of cynicism shot from the newly arrived crowd to the casket and its would-be protectors. However, with the imposing figure of Levat Seymour, the 27-year-old son of the late Sergei, carefully attending nearby, nobody yet dared to act on their disdain.

The crowd continued to pack themselves into the church, soon overflowing outside. As the clock signaled the turning of the 9th hour after midnight, Levat and his small, dedicated church group, still very loyal to the late Seymour's teachings, all stood and gathered around the front of the sanctuary. "Thank you all for coming," Levat announced. "It's good to see that none of you have lost your knack for a spectacle: trading miracles for a chance to stir up trouble." Faint smiles broke across the faces of the followers standing behind Levat, numbering about 20 in total. The crowd in the pews, however, remained silent. Sour. Levat continued, "I know that as long as

nothing interesting happens, you'll all be longing for the warmth of your family home's bedbugs and fleas, so I'll keep this short. 2 days ago, my father's Sunday service changed lives, as had become the pattern. You all sang and danced in these very pews, overwhelmed by the sight of Dima walking, of Kai-el saying her first words in 15 years, and many others. It is bewildering that you now stand here again in such bad humor. My dear father's death shocked us all and, yes, the circumstances are challenging. But his message was true and his results real. I stand here this morning to do as he would want me to do. Not to praise his history or personal greatness, not to excuse his death, but to affirm that God who worked through him may still work through us and through you. I hereby say that if any of you wish to find the secret of my father, not of my earthly father but of Christ, cleanse your hearts of your hurt as is commanded and search His face. That will be your real recompense. Otherwise, be left to the agony of your own wretchedness."

At that, Levat stopped and ceded the way for anyone behind him to take his place as speaker. He gently walked off and sat down out of the way on the floor beside Anov, Levat's cousin, 4 years his junior. "How was that," he asked.

"You're as brave as ever. When you began, I was afraid that you were trying to start-"Anov cuts himself short. An old man making his way up the center of the room caught his attention. He limped heavily, clearly struggling to support himself. It was Dima, the man mentioned by Levat in his speech. Up until last Sunday when his family finally carried him up to Seymour, he was paralyzed. He walked out of that service with ferocity. He was now dragging his left leg as he approached Seymour's ramshackle casket.

"Give it back," he murmured to himself. "Give it back, give it back." Needing to use the casket to stabilize himself, Dima grabbed it, placing nearly all his body weight on it. His hand broke

through the wood with a snap bringing out a choking yelp from him. The scene stirred everyone in the room with great anticipation. “Give it back,” he said louder. Retracting his arm from inside the casket, he noticed a small scrape on top of his forearm. He riled himself up to the point of fury. “Liar!” he shouts.

The dedicated followers of the church still gathered near the casket reacted harshly, their hopeful illusion of Dima’s intentions shattered. Two or Three of them rush at the near-invalid and pull him away from Seymour. “Liar! Thief! Hypocrite! Hypocrite!” he continued to shout. The followers were carrying him with determination but still trying their hardest not to hurt the poor fellow. The crowd around them, however, only saw the attempt to forcefully remove someone of their own heart. The room erupted.

Both the men and the women shouted in immense agitation, the young and able-bodied among them rushing to Dima’s “aid.” They stripped him from his support, focusing more on distancing the church stewards than on protecting him. He fell to the ground with a thud that nobody heard over the chaos.

Levat and Anov had jumped to their feet at the first outcry from the crowd but hadn’t yet intervened. Once Dima hit the ground and an all-out brawl was on the horizon, however, they had split into action. Anov’s heart ached for Dima and he threw himself into the crowd. Levat, in comparison, climbed up onto the nearest pew and began shouting commands therefrom.

Anov braved the crowd’s flailing blows to shield Dima, cradling his head in his arms. His stature was frail, but just large enough to serve as a useful shield to the old man. “It’s okay, it’s okay, Dima,” he said. “Are you hurt?” Dima nodded his head. They didn’t realize it yet, but he had been dropped onto his hip, which had broken with a severe, sharp pain.

Levat's words from atop the church pew held no impact. His commands were cast into the wind, his reasoning crushed by the temperament of the crowd. Officially, the tension was broken— a spark giving way to conflagration. The only person to notice the final result of the mischief was Anov. Still laying on the ground, sorely aware of any freshly developing threat to Dima, he glimpsed it, the well-dressed man being drug across the threshold of the exterior door. He tried to get someone's attention, but he couldn't abandon Dima.

When the chaos finally dissipated, Levat and the other church stewards were themselves made aware of the thievery; Sergei Seymour's body was gone.

2

Anov lay still on the ground whispering heartfelt proclamations to Dima, who failed to move without writhing in pain. His apologetic words, full of love and emotion, were prayer-like. Despite Dima's newfound distrust in the Seymour family and their prayers, Anov's was one of great comfort to him. However, Levat's demeanor counteracted Anov's comfort; he nearly scared Dima into the grave by pushing the rickety, now empty, casket to the floor. Most of the already damaged wood broke away.

"Witless bunch! Did any of you see what happened?" Levat demanded, his voice loud. He looked around the room accusingly. Instead of finding fault, however, he saw eyes that matched his own: upset, angry, hurt. He didn't need to add to the victimization. He inhaled deeply. His voice was quieter, but no less stern or demanding, "I'm sorry. But if you saw something, you need to tell me."

The 20 other stewards aside from the Seymour cousins had all been preoccupied by the crowd that outnumbered them 5 to 1. The only one to see anything broke his prayer with Dima to respond, "there were 2 gentlemen that drug him that way." He pointed to the door with his finger.

"Who were they?" Levat asked, backed by the other stewards.

"I… I don't know, I'm sorry."

"What do you mean? Are you blind?" Levat had walked right up to where Anov and Dima were laying, imposing himself over them.

Anov stuttered, unsure of how to continue. He felt so useless compared to Levat, compared to everyone else. He didn't even think of looking up at the men's faces. "I, I-"

"It's not like we're dealing with a city of strangers," Levat ridiculed.

"Let him be, Levat," said Yoshna, one of the older of the 20 stewards, firmly placing his hand on Levat's shoulder. "He did enough saving Dima's life."

Dima placed his hand on Anov's, forcing himself to smile through the pain at his guardian angel. Levat acquiesced, taking another deep breath, his face relaxing into a cold stare. "You're right," he stepped away from the group of people towards the door. "I'll go see where they took him."

Multiple people in the group tried to dispute the idea, but Levat ignored them, leaving them to deal with Dima. He told himself to calm down, otherwise he may not be able to think straight enough to find his father's corpse, but he was nonetheless committed to taking matters into his own hands. He strutted down the street, carefully observing the passersby, looking for any critical sign.

"I hope you don't take him too seriously," Yoshna said nodding to Anov.

"No, it's fine. I know where his heart's at. He's always been harsh, but he means well. It's especially hard on him now with the death of his dad." Anov's heart genuinely began to split for his cousin, knowing the turmoil that he must be facing. When the 'great healer' suddenly dies of a severe infection, the son of such a man is inevitably left with not just the body of his father, but also a community rife with newfound doubt hellbent on calling his life into question.

Yoshna sighs, "Yeah. You're both strong kids… strong men," he corrects.

“He’s strong, and he’ll be fine. He’ll figure something out.” He looks down at Dima and kisses him on the forehead. “Can you all help me with him?”

Yoshna and a small team of others bring Seymour’s casket and gently lift Dima into it. It was painful, and moving him likely worsened his injury, but they got him where they could carry him safely. Anov never once let go of the poor man’s hand, watching on the edge of tears as he grimaced and moaned. Dima choked out a very faint “thank you,” before falling asleep in the casket.

They slowly marched down the streets of the village. Yoshna discussed with the others about what they ought to do and speculated on what Levat may learn and bring back to them. None of the answers were clear. Some suggested leaving Seymour’s miraculous path behind, claiming that it was a gift only for him. Others idolized the late healer, willing to do anything to become like him.

“What would you do,” Yoshna asked Anov, who had stayed silent throughout the journey thus far.

Anov looked at Yoshna, then down at Dima, and sighed. “I just want everyone to be happy.”

“I see that,” Yoshna smiled. “We all want that. But how do you see it happening?”

“I… I don’t know. Levat is the planner. I’m not good enough to do what he does.”

“No good enough?” Yoshna reiterated. Anov looked at him blankly, not knowing what else to say.

“See, Anov,” Yoshna began again, “you and Levat may be different, but Dima here likely would have been trampled to death if not for you. You have a very special strength.”

Anov stared at the ground, wanting to believe Yoshna's kind words, but feeling only guilt about his inability to do more. *I can't even find the words to describe to him how useless I really am,* he thought to himself. *Levat would know how to say it. Levat always finds the right words.*

The seeds of his self-doubt grew deeper as they carried Dima closer to his home. His head hung low. If he had been looking up, he may have seen the villagers gawking at the new person in the casket. He watched his steps, however, making sure not to trip, hiding his face from Yoshna whom he believed thought of him too highly.

They knocked on Dima's only door and were received by his daughter, a woman already of 30, already widowed. Yoshna lead the casket bearers into the corner of the single-room house where lay a small mattress. They lifted Dima onto it, this time making sure that they were gentle enough to not even wake him. Anov was drawn to the woman panicked over the condition of her dear father. He sat with her, reassuring her that he would be fine, praying with her at her own request. Few of the church stewards left as the tasks dwindled, but most stayed to help the small family. They spent the day chopping and stocking firewood, cleaning linen, doing what they could to fill cracks in the floors, walls, and ceiling, and sharing words of faith.

As the sun set and everyone, including even Anov, began bidding their farewells, a loud knock was heard from outside. The daughter of the household stood and went to answer, revealing Levat behind the door. "They're trying to make fools out of us," he announced.

3

Levat, Anov, and the rest of the stewards made their way to the market square the next morning to see that the townspeople had erected a small stage. Just as Levat had learned, they were preparing to publicly desecrate Seymour's body. The crowds hadn't moved in yet, except for a few of the most dedicated who had apparently begun preparations before daybreak. The arrival of the 'Seymour Clan' put them all on edge. Levat, however, did not come on impulse. Dressed in their finest attire, the stewards were calm, thinking of nothing but their personal roles to play in their plan.

They stayed on the outskirts of the square. As people began to pack around the stage, a large, wooden post was set into its center. Shortly following that, a covered wagon was wheeled up. After an hour, the square was full. There was just enough room for the stewards to make their way through the crowd in groups of two.

At exactly 9:30, the mayor of the town stepped up onto the stage to address his attendees. He violently clapped his hands together to grab the crowd's attention and began to speak. "Even with the rumored miracles, this is a bigger turnout than Seymour ever drew while alive! I know none of us could have asked for anything more pleasing." He paused, opening his arms in a wide, welcoming display. "Today, you get what you really deserve! No more lies, no more false hope, no more rumors. Today, you see the truth of what became of the man of Sergei Seymour!" The crowd cheered. "To begin our special day, I am first going to invite a few honored guests to share with you the details or our favorite stories. I have hand-selected my favorite 'testimonies,' (he put on a mocking tone). I know you will all be pleased to learn their truth. Rashnikov, please, come on up and tell us what you think of our infamous Seymour church."

A series of 10 people mounted the stage one after the other, each detailing how Seymour spoke with such alluring confidence. They told of his proclamations and of their once thriving faith. However, they all announced that whatever they once believed was now obviously untrue. Some believed themselves healed of scurvy, of tuberculosis, of broken bones. One claimed that he believed himself to be healed from leprosy. Another told of how she hallucinated the regrowth of her arm for 4 days. “Evidently, Seymour was no follower-of-Christ. If his power was real, in any sense, it was obviously of Satan!” the mayor proclaimed after the last invitee stepped down.

He continued to aggravate the crowd into believing that Seymour was, in fact, not only a heretic, as was plain as day, but even a devil-worshiper. The biggest evidence of this was the man’s own death. “We all know there is no death in Christ!” he shouted. “If he were of our God as he claimed to be, he would shake off the serpents and drink any deadly thing unharmed. No infection could take his life!” The crowd cheered again, and the mayor pointed to the wheeled wagon. “Without any more delay, behold, the False Prophet!”

The cover was pulled from the wagon revealing the sickly body of Sergie Seymour, unclothed and decaying. The smell gagged even the most repellent of the nearby participants. Instantly, Levat appeared from the middle of the crowd, standing on the shoulders of two of his fellow church stewards. “You lie with your quotes!” His words cut through the atmosphere that still echoed the mayor’s venomous claims. “’They shall take up serpents, and if they drink any deadly thing, it shall not hurt them. They shall lay hands on the sick, and they shall recover.’ That is the truth behind the mayor’s accusations! How many of you can say you’ve done miracles? You now berate my father for his deeds that you can only achieve in your fictions! You are vultures, vultures— circling from your high place preying on the free, on the dead!” the crowd stirred, booing and disrupting as they willed.

“Sit down, boy,” the mayor called in return. “You’re embarrassing yourself and your father’s legacy even further. We all know you’re nothing but an arrogant sensualist. The proof of your father’s illegitimacy is right there in that wagon.” He pointed down to the corpse and Anov turned his back trying not to be recognized. He and the most able-bodied of the church stewards were slowly surrounding the wagon.

“That is not my father. My father once inhabited that body, but he is now imbued among the words he gave, in the words he inspires today. His day of flesh has passed, that is no betrayal!”

“He failed us!” a voice screams from the crowd, followed by others. “Stop confusing matters!” “You’re a liar just as he was!” The voices grew in number and strength, reaching the verge of uproar.

The mayor called for order, again clapping to reorient the attention of the onlookers. “I know you hear their cries just as I do. These fine people have read great perfidy in your family. All they wish for is to rid themselves of the burdensome memories of our town’s personal heretic so that they can lead peaceful lives.”

“They lead nothing!” Levat proclaimed instantly, nearly cutting the mayor off. “This crowd is full of sheep. You do not lead your own lives. You clung to the miraculous for nothing but feeblemindedness. You wanted a god in the flesh, that is why you hurt so! He did not fail you; you fail yourselves.”

“His death is his failure. He pretended to be able to take care of this town, he pretended to do it out of love, but if he could not take care of himself, how could he have taken care of the needy beggars of our dear town? They need help. They need love, do you not?” The angry crowd voiced its agreement with the mayor.

“Is it really your logic that a man of God must be immortal? Did Jesus himself not stand mocked before a crowd such as this? Did He not die, humiliated and in agony? Did He not also heal the sick and raise the dead?” The mayor went to reply, but Levat didn’t allow it. “If you’re as capable of differentiating truth and lie, if you’re as Christian as you say you are, why hurt? Shake off the serpent, if that is what my father really is, and take up your places as real authorities of the Kingdom of Heaven. Stop it with this farce of self-made misery. Your faithlessness is not my father’s doing; it has plagued you from the beginning!”

Few continued to pay attention to Levat after that. Most, without the mayor’s intervention, rolled into senseless shouts, often not even contributing words, but only sounds meant to drown out Levat’s voice. The mayor stood still, watching Levat deal with the hecklers, grinning when they eventually pulled him down from above their heads. At the sight of the Seymour son being swallowed into the swarm beneath him, he turned and signaled for the corpse to be brought up and hung on the post. His expectations of receiving the body from the hands of his fellow desecrators, however, were unfulfilled. He glimpsed the tail-end of the wagon as the Seymour church stewards ferociously hauled it away. Flustered and fiery, he shouted commands to chase them down, turning the already boisterous host of townsfolk into a mob.

4

“Go, go, go!”

“Hurry up! They’ll catch us!”

“Faster! Go!” The stewards’ words ran together in panic. It’s hard enough to evade a mob carrying nothing but your own weight. With a wagon and a corpse, it’s impossible.

They cut and swerved around the houses, cutting through as many of the narrow alleyways as possible to escape the vision of the mob. The wooden wheels bounced harshly off every rock, every indent in the dirt. Fallen branches caught in the spokes, each hill a defiant hand threatening to throw them back into the lion’s den. With every step, something worked to slow them down.

Coming out of the town center, they rushed straight towards the Seymour family home out in the fields where they planned to bury the late patriarch. Thanks to the narrow alleys that the stewards took coming out of the square, they had won a 200-yard advance on the mob. As both parties entered the clearing outside the city, however, Anov repeatedly looked behind, seeing perhaps the whole 3000-person population of the town.

The stewards reached the Seymour house and immediately set Sergei into the burial hole they dug the night prior. Even with a pre-dug hole, the mounds of dirt were hardened from the icy, moon-lit temperatures. There was no way they were going to backfill their burial site before the mob arrived. They tried anyway. The strongest manned the shovels while Anov and the others prayed. Most of them prayed for protection over the grave and over themselves. Some diverged and asked forgiveness for their failures. Anov prayed for the hearts of the people. He anguished over their suffering, and, in that moment, the burial of his uncle was meaningless.

When the mob landed on the Seymour property, nothing could restrain them. The grave had only been backfilled by a quarter, barely enough to cover Mr. Seymour's infections body. The first wave of the assault flooded the grave site. The stewards held their ground in front of their dear pastor but were immediately overwhelmed. Just before Anov was dragged to the ground, Yoshna interceded, taking up a shovel and clearing a brief opening for him. He broke toward the house in a sprint. Entering, he fumbled chaotically around the Seymour supplies. The sounds of his rummaging, messy and tumultuous, did nothing at all to drown out the asynchronous chanting from outside.

Glass shattered behind him, letting one of the shovels from the gravesite fly into the house. Two burly men turn their heads into the window. "He's in here, get the door," one of them commands. Their heavy winter boots vibrate the whole izba as they pound against the threshold. Picking up the mattress, Anov found what he was looking for: a musket and a small pouch of powder. Running to the furthest window from the attackers out front, he used the butt of the rifle to shatter an escape route. He crawled through just as the wooden latch on the door snapped giving entry to his would-be assailants.

He ran again as fast as he could. His thoughts tangled into knots, dreadfully concerned about the wellbeing of his comrades. *Did they escape? Are they running, too? Are they hurt? Did they kill them?* He ran away directionless. He ran until he couldn't and stopped to load the gunpowder into the barrel. His vision narrowed, focused only on getting his trembling hands to not empty the pouch's contents on the ground. He didn't see that he was being followed. Just before he started to run again, the musket was stripped from his hands.

He scanned the broad-shouldered thief in shock. "Levat?" he asked, surprised that his expectations of death were not met.

“Did you finish loading it?” Levat’s question went unanswered. He repeated it with greater emphasis, “Did you load it?”

“Only the powder,” Anov finally squeaked.

“Good. Stay with me.’ Keeping the barrel lifted, Levat led Anov back to his home under siege. The mob had stayed behind after noticing Anov’s escape, digging Seymour’s body back up and destroying the izba. Weak points were found and the comparatively thin logs of Seymour’s solo-build were quickly cut and removed. The thatch roofing was ripped open and piled inside the house, thrown around the stove. When the cousins had reached the mob with musket in-hand, the izba still stood, but only just.

Presenting the musket, Levat shouted into the mass, “Hey, hey!” He fired the weapon when he saw his father’s corpse carried into the house. Everyone stopped, briefly looking in the direction of the sound, but quickly resumed their destruction at the dismissal of the mayor.

He had appeared from out behind the crowd on horseback, followed directly by two other riders, themselves carrying muskets. Levat handed his own down to Anov to be reloaded. With a signal of his hand, the mayor’s entourage took off and surrounded Levat and Anov. Anov finished filling the barrel with powder and handed the rifle back to Levat, who promptly feigned to push shot down with the ramrod. The mayor barked orders to his officials from a distance.

As the riders enclosed the cousins, the mayor called for their arrest. Levat made sure not to point the gun dangerously but nevertheless kept it brandished. It was his support to help him gain time, but he knew he couldn’t use it to mount a real defense.

Levat pronounced an argument in his favor, asking the officials on his left and right if they really thought what they were doing was right. “Is it I, who am the real problem? The mob is right

there!" Their commitment may have waivered if the mayor hadn't answered, asking who was at fault for the riot.

"If you had really cared for the people, cared as Christ would have, you would have let them save themselves from the torment of your father. Instead, your actions have led you here, rifle in-hand, ready to claim your next victim. You've already shot at me once."

Levat instantly realized the situation he was in. Anov spoke for him, yelling at the mayor, "He did not shoot at you."

"Run, Anov. Get out of here," Levat lowered his weapon, again telling Anov to leave. Suddenly, the mob behind the mayor cheered and the little izba, or, what once was an izba, caught aflame. Anov stumbled backwards, dazed. The growing fire invaded his peripheral as he watched the officers dismount and charge at Levat. He had no words, no extensive thoughts, only a feeling, ineffable. He was tense but not scared. He recognized the threat, but never once experienced it as dangerous. He longed for a distant dream. He wished above all things that in that moment, everyone around him could see the world—see Levat—through his own eyes. He wished there was a way for his love to erupt out of him like a volcano and touch the whole Earth.

Levat was brought to the ground, beat, and tied. He never made a sound. With every cruel kick and additional skin-burning knot in the rope, he stared at the mayor, his eyes like those of vipers. His head was pushed into the mud of the cold, barren field, but his eyes never wandered.

"Levat Seymour," the mayor decreed, "for crimes against the people of Rassvet, including theft, heresy, inciting to violence, public disturbance, attempted assassination of a public official, and the successful murder of one Dima Shrewdnikov, you are under arrest."

5

The brutal cold of December had officially set in. Each of Levat's movements were stiff and jittery. When night fell, the temperatures in his cell numbed his skin so that he could no longer feel the itch of his clothes or blanket. With the only exchanges between him and another person coming primarily from brief moments with the guards, whom he goaded with a growing list of individually crafted nicknames, he had a great deal of time to himself. He was rarely weary, however. He was anxious at first, but his solitude gave him ample opportunity to pray, and he couldn't resist. He eventually found his barren, mostly wooden cell peaceful. Because of this peace, he never questioned his circumstances, despite their potentially fatal nature, and the only time that he considered his words to come at the trial were during the few moments in which he was permitted visitors.

He had received three thus far, all during the first week of his incarceration. During the preceding three weeks after the original ten days had passed without a trial, all visitors were denied. Yoshna had visited twice, separated by a visit by one of the other church stewards. They brought him the news of his charges and helped craft a line of defense. They also offered various attorneys from the area who were willing to take his case, but Levat was hardly impressed by any of their faculties. As far as he was concerned, he was better off defending himself than yielding the responsibility of the case over to someone incompetent and untrustworthy. This was especially true when the feebleness of the supposed evidence and arguments against him were discussed.

In light of the situation's importance, Anov had not yet tried to visit, allowing the craftier authorities room to play. However, with Levat's apparent resolution to represent himself and the

recent re-posting of an official trial date, he decided it was time. In a way, he needed it to be time. In less than two weeks, Levat was set to be ridiculed by the greatest prosecutor that Rassvet had ever welcomed. This didn't concern Anov, however. It was rather the fact that Rassvet itself was where the trial was set to be held. The judge would be supplied, as their little town did not have any such official, but the jury was to be pulled from the local residents according to the mayor's preference. Behind the scenes, the Rassvet Administration was constructing an impossible situation for the defense.

Anov arrived at the prison, a small and now repurposed military fort, mid-evening on December 6th and was graciously admitted as a visitor to Levat Seymour. The elder cousin was dragged out of his cell and sat down in front of Anov. They were separated by a wall with an uneven rectangular hole cut out of it at shoulder height. Levat had to slouch to see through it.

"Hey, Anov."

"Oh, thank God you're ok. Yoshna told everyone they were letting you freeze to death."

"Well, they certainly aren't keeping me warm. I might lose a few toes by the end of this, but I'll live."

Anov choked down his desperation. If he didn't know Levat so well, he may have taken his remark with much more gravity. "You shouldn't have to lose anything… Is there anything I can do? Please, let me do something for you!"

"They won't hear your complains, Yoshna has already tried everything. He actually threw such a fit at his first visit that they tried to keep me warm by burning my best blanket." Levat paused and before making his next suggestion with a smirk, "you could smuggle in a new one."

“Are you mad? They’d catch that in a heartbeat and—”

“At least I’d no longer have a trial to prepare for. Come on Anov, nobody here could resist your doe eyes, you’re the epitome of innocent.” Levat’s chuckle quickly turned to a shiver.

“How are you doing it?” Anov’s face was contorted between grief and unbelief. *How can he be so strong, joking with me through his torment?* He thought to himself.

“You know it has nothing to do with me. You were no different when we had to bury your dad. You were probably stronger, actually.”

“What? I was a mess. I cried for nearly 3 days after that.”

“You didn’t cry because of your own loss. My dad lost his brother; you cried for him, I know it.”

“I—”

“You know,” Levat interrupted, “you know that’s why he did what he did. You after you lost your father, that’s why mine started his church work. Did he ever tell you that?”

“He, he thanked me, but he thanked everyone. He had such great love for people, for everyone around him.”

“He was like that because of you. I’m sure if you hadn’t been there for him, he would have wound himself mad cursing at God for taking his brother.” He reached his hand out through the hole in the wall towards his younger cousin and was immediately chastised by the nearby guard.

“Easy, Precious,” Levat said, nodding his head towards the guard. “What do you think I’m doing, giving him the last of my breadcrumbs?” He turned his head back towards Anov through

the hole. “I call him ‘Precious.’ He looks tough, but… You’re a real softy, ain’t ya?” Precious scowled.

“Is he really?”

Levat leaned in and answered in a whisper, “he’s a sack full of rage, is what he is.”

Anov’s eyes widen, “why is it that you poke sticks into the ears of every bear you see?”

“I guess…,” he leans back away from Anov, “I guess it’s just what I know. I’m a little different from you and my father, I think. The fire burns away the deadwood, and all.”

“Fire? Deadwood?”

“Sorry. Right, I just mean that Truth has the habit of hurting those who hear it.”

“Do you think that I’m a liar, then, since I can’t speak as you do?”

“A liar? No, no, not at all. You’re no liar, Anov, certainly not. But you—” he chose his words carefully, “you hate hurting people, so you stay quiet.”

Levat’s analysis rang true to Anov, but only in part. Something was imperfect, but he could never express it. He refocused himself on Levat, “Is that what you count to do at the trial? Hurt people?”

“That’s what a trial is for: getting the truth out. It’s hardly my fault if they’re hurt by it. They’re a sick group of people.”

“Is, is that what you think of them? That they’re sick? They’re not sick, Levat.”

“No? Then why do they insist on torturing us?”

“They’re hurt, that’s all. They just don’t understand. I want you to love them like I do. Please.”

Levat went silent in thought. Seconds passed, and then minutes. “I do love them, Anov. But it is true that I don’t love them like you. I want what’s best for them. I know what’s best for them, but they reject it in arrogance. That’s why they’re sick. They’re each possessed with self. It’s corrosive. It is a sickness. They refuse to see beyond it regardless of what I say, but I have to say something; I have to give them the chance to hear what may change their lives.” Silence abounded again. “What would you do, Anov… in my stead?”

“I… I don’t…” he fumbled with his words, torn on what to say. He had no idea what he would say if he were the one on trial. He could only picture the faces of the people in front of him. He imagined faces full of great fear and anger, but also with such astounding potential. Tears welled up in his eyes and he lost control of his voice. “I wouldn’t… I… They-“

“Hey, hey, Anov, I’m sorry. Hey, look at me. I’m sorry.”

“No… it, it wasn’t you,” he sniffled.

“You know, sometimes I do wish I could see the world through your eyes. How beautiful it must be!” Anov tried to calm himself as Levat spoke. “I won’t pressure you. You don’t deserve it.”

“I want to help you! Please, let me help you.”

“You are helping me, Anov. Just be here. You don’t need to do anything else.”

Anov wanted to do more. He wanted to snap his fingers and fix everything, but he knew that could never happen. Levat, too, wished that Anov could say something to guide him. Deep down he knew he needed more guidance than he could offer himself. But neither of them could express a solution.

“I’ll remember you when I present my case. I’ll remember your love for them.” Anov met his eyes and nodded. “But I don’t think I’ll be able to spare them, and I know what that will mean for me. Christ came as a sword, as He said. If they send me away for killing Dima, as they claim, and if they do so because I speak exactly what I know to be true, then maybe it’s the path that I should be on, regardless of how desolate.”

Levat inspired himself with his words and Anov saw the passion for truth in his eyes, but he couldn’t help but feel that his cousin’s inclination was contaminated. He saw it as if it were behind a veil.

They spent the remainder of their time together without many words. When the guards had deemed it the end of the prison’s visiting hours, they pulled Levat back to his cell and escorted Anov into the street. He didn’t return to see his cousin before the trial, and there was no substantial news warranting a trip on behalf of the stewards to update him. At noon on December 16th, Levat was brought back into town and displayed in the Seymour church building. The mayor of Rassvet had commandeered it as the building in town with the greatest number of appropriate seats. A hand-selected jury of 6 was positioned beside the elevated ambo of the church, the judge sat on it, against the back wall, and the pews were always filled with a rotating crowd of faces as the people of Rassvet were permitted to come and go as they pleased.

6

As the judge opened the proceedings, the church overflowed with attendees. Many had even decided it was worth their time to sit in the wind outside the windows of the church, just hoping to be able to take part in the historical chaos that was unfolding in their town. “People of Rassvet, esteemed jury, and all gathered in this court,” the judge began, “I, Judge Ivan Khavod, call this trial to order on this sixteenth day of December, in the eighteen hundred and eight year of our Lord. Within the walls of the Seymour church, now a place of judgment before the eyes of the town and of God, we stand to weigh the scales against our defendant, Levat Seymour.

“Aged twenty-seven years, Mr. Seymour is the son of the late Sergei Seymour, whose name still resonates in this valley. The prosecution, led by Prosecutor Mikhail Letafel, speaks for this town and its governance, bringing serious charges against the accused. These stem from the unrest following his father’s burial rites and the discord that has disturbed your community’s peace.

“The charges against Levat Seymour are these: Theft, for the alleged removal of Sergei Seymour’s body from public view; Heresy, for promoting teachings contrary to the established faith of this community; Incitement to Violence, for words and deeds said to have sparked unrest; Public Disturbance, for breaking the tranquility of Rassvet’s streets; Attempted Assassination of a Public Official, for discharging a firearm with intent to harm the mayor; and Murder of Dima Shrewdnikov, for actions intended to harm and causing the death of the townsman.

“Many of these charges carry heavy consequences, and their penalties, if guilt is found, will match their severity. For theft, incitement to violence, and public disturbance, a guilty verdict will be faced with forced local servitude for a term set by this court. For heresy, if proven,

penalties may include up to 25 years' banishment from Rassvet. The gravest charges—attempted assassination and murder—face harsher outcomes: permanent exile to the nation's work-camps, where conditions are severe and labor is relentless.

"The jury, selected from Rassvet's citizens, is tasked with examining the evidence presented by prosecution and defense. Levat Seymour has chosen to represent himself, and we must ensure he has a fair chance of pleading his case. The prosecution will present its evidence first, followed by the defense, and all will be judged under the light of truth. I urge the jury to deliberate with clear minds, free from bias.

"This trial is not only about one man but about the order and values of your Rassvet community. Let us proceed with the respect this moment demands. The prosecution may now begin its opening statement."

Prosecutor Letafel had thoroughly prepared for the trial; he spoke with dignity, targeting the community's most volatile points of contention with great precision. "You were promised miracles—made to believe that God favored your town specially—but the late Sergei Seymour only lead you into despair. When you tried to take back control of your lives, the inheritor of the Seymour legacy, the defendant Levat Seymour, continued to manipulate you into with his vivid and compelling words, wrapped in the confidence of a leader who knows what's best. But you, dear people of Rassvet, are not so gullible. You saw through him. You saw that those under the Seymour leadership are the blind led by the blind."

The prosecution continued to shape the people's opinion of Levat's character, often painting him to be a cunning, creative liar and manipulator of thought, but also a directionless, blind follower

of his father's "ignorant idolatry" in a single breath. His opening arguments for each of the charges were as follows:

"On November 2nd of this year, Levat Seymour followed through with a clearly organized plan to steal the body of Sergei Seymour from the town square. The Honorary Mayor of Rassvet himself ordered the body to be present. As most of you remember, the defendant stood before him in the crowd, speaking provocatively, seeking, as it seemed on the surface, to make a fool out of you, the cherished people of Rassvet, and the mayor himself. As you would all find out shortly, however, he was but a distraction purposed for the theft of the Seymour body right from under your noses. Under his order and leadership, the Seymour church group successfully pilfered the wagon containing their late ambassador's corpse.

"That same day, his words and previously-accounted-for actions sparked the Rassvet riot now infamous to you and all the nearby establishments. The defendant's provocations, calls to action, and subsequent action itself lead to uproar. It led to a manhunt. It led to the desecration of a gravesite. It led to the burning of the late Sergei's hand-built home, property that held historical and practical importance to your town. He, as leader and spokesman, interrupted the peaceful gathering of the townsfolk organized by the Rassvet administration. He disrupted the public peace, and, as is seen later, violence was incited, all still included under the defendant's jurisdiction of responsibility.

"According to the peaceful and righteous beliefs of this dear town, Sergei Seymour, or any other man in his such proclaimed position, had no right to abandon the townspeople, those who relied upon him, in death. The defendant's claims against your understanding prevented you from grieving. The defendant, again acting as the son inheriting the legacy of his father, spoke against the fine leadership of the mayor of Rassvet, proclaiming that his father was indeed sent by God,

despite his death, and even dared to claim that his father was still alive, testifying and guiding his followers still through his word not-yet-past. This is a concoction of ideas meant so clearly to gather your faith to his own family only for such faith to end, as we saw with the original Seymour, in betrayal once again. The defendant is a heretic, undoubtedly.

"Again, on November 2nd of this year, the defendant acquired a musket from his family home, loaded it, and discharged it in the direct proximity of the mayor. Everyone in the crowd heard the shot, and everyone knew exactly where he was aiming—at the head of the mayor so easily distinguished through the crowd on his horse. Ask yourselves, what kind of leader would put himself in the way of rebellions gunfire for you? Only the bravery and honor of your mayor could stand up to such a test. As will be testified by the officers present at the time, the defendant had the rifle reloaded and brandished it a second time, directly threatening them and the mayor as they moved to arrest him.

"Finally, in the beloved memory of the poor Dima Shrewdnikov, I ask the jury to be extra critical in your judgements of the defendant. Dear Dima did not deserve death, he was but another victim of the Seymour malpractice, of the Seymour lie! However, because of the aggravated rhetoric of the defendant and his complete lack of any real human dignity, Dima was assaulted by his church followers and killed. He was killed right here," the prosecutor yelled, "in this very room, on that very spot right there! According to the numerous first-hand testimony, as Dima lay injured, the defendant jumped onto the very pew I stand before now to continue to make shrewd commands to his followers and the crowd, further inciting them to mayhem. The poor Dima was then seen dead, carried in the rotten and decrepit casket only fit for a heretic such as Seymour, away from the church. The defendant, through neglect, direct calls to violence, and the order of his leadership of his father's disciples that he inherited, killed Dima Shrewdnikov."

7

After Letafel had ceded his time, the crowd was excited. The judge complimented the passion of the prosecution but encouraged the jury to be weary of theater. He then called for the defense to stand, and Levat made his retort.

He spoke calmly. He knew that the prosecution's case relied on not much more than theories and circumstantial inferences. He knew that the case was most likely to be determined by the image he presented of himself to the jury. He began by thanking the "honorable judge" for his sincerity and keen eye for "ostentatious performance." He addressed the jury kindly, saying to them that he will hold them and the townspeople in his prayers so that their consciousness may be clear, and he asked that they keep him in their prayers too, regardless of their final decision on his fate. When addressing the charges, he presented the following argument:

"I did not call for violence, nor act for Rassvet to be disquieted. I am not the inheritor of my father's legacy. I have not claimed to create miracles myself, nor have I commanded my church family to do so. I do not have such authority over them. If you see me as their head, you are mistaken. I am but my father's son, and I have wanted not to maintain his legacy for the benefit of my own name, but to continue to progress in the miraculous nature of our God. If you believe that God is good, as I do, you will see that my heart was not after myself, but instead after the wellbeing of my community.

"As for the theft of my father's corpse, how can you count my actions as nefarious when my beloved father was meant for burial on the day prior. If a theft did occur, it was not mine. How did my father find his place beside the mayor in that wagon? I did not place him there. My church did not donate his body to the masses. The Rassvet administration did not precure it

through legal or official means. My father was stolen from me on the first of November, on the day he was meant to be buried peacefully in the same yard as his wife, my mother. The theft, my faithful jury and esteemed judge and community, took place not on November 2nd, but on the 1st, when the body was stolen from the Seymour church.

“Similarly, Dima, (I call him Dima as that is the name we all knew him so well by), did not die in this church building. As will be testified by the church stewards and Dima’s daughter herself, Mr. Shrewdnikov was brought back to his home and family alive. He and his daughter were well taken care of, just as I knew they would be, by the loving and faithful people that I call my brothers and sisters in Christ. I ask you sincerely to err with caution as you consider this charge. I ask that you thoroughly investigate and thoroughly interview all of those involved. I did not kill Dima; I did not harm Dima.

“As for the charge that the attempted assassination of our great mayor, frankly, it is perhaps the most ludicrous. The musket was not discharged in the direction of the mayor, and certainly not with the intent to harm. I am the one who pulled the trigger, yes, but it was not intended for anyone in that crowd. As the fine officials of our town can testify to, the musket did not even contain any shot, despite the claim that I brandished it against the mayor for a second time. Never once was there anything but powder in the firearm.

“Now, I’m sure you may ask yourself, why have a gun at all if it is not loaded? The answer is simple: to make the violent mob weary at my doorstep. It was a symbol of defense, allowing me to maintain mine and my dear cousin’s safety if their attention turned towards us. As the prosecution laid out themselves, the gathering on that morning of November 2nd had turned into a manhunt, and me and my family were the targets, not the instigators. If I am as responsible as the prosecution claims for the radical turn in the demeanor of the crowd, of the fine people of

Rassvet, why would my home, my family burial site, and my father's corpse be the targets of their destruction? How is it possible for the party supposedly responsible for the beckoning of the violence to be the sole victim of that violence? Of the charges laid out before us today, I cannot possibly be guilty."

After the two opening statements were finished, the judge moved to the examination of evidence and testimony. Townspeople were called out of the crowd to be questioned and to recount what they remember from each of the days in question. Some among them languished still over the loss of their miracles and held the Seymour family accountable for all of their personal problems. These people made sure to corroborate the prosecution's version of the events. They said that the funeral service on the 1st was "scandalous" and that Levat had stood up above the crowd to command that his followers target their violence towards specific people. Some even decreed that Levat called Dima out by name, telling people to attack and kill him. The townsfolk did indeed see Dima being carried in a casket away from the church.

Some of the testimonies about November 2nd told how Levat stood in the field for many minutes lining up his rifle shot at the mayor before pulling the trigger. One man claimed that there was obviously shot in the musket as he had seen it and even been hit by it, but that luckily at that range it didn't harm him. He called Levat stupid for thinking that a buck and ball round would be effective at the range that he had set up at.

Most of the testimonies, however, told a much milder story that better aligned with Levat's and the other church stewards' details. Levat was not heard calling anyone out by name at the funeral. It seemed that Dima was injured not by attack, but when he was dropped. People disagreed as to why he was dropped, however. The officers responsible for arresting Levat theorized that the shot must have fallen out of the rifle before they checked it. They said that in

his hurry to load it, he must not have used the ramrod right. Mild skepticism was sewn in through their attempts to answer the varying questions posed to them by the prosecution and defense, respectively. Yoshna's testimony ended with a joke that embarrassed the mayor. He had said that from his point of view, laid out on the ground by a maniac using his own shovel, the mayor kept a very unusual distance from Levat. He insinuated that the mayor was in fact afraid of a unloaded rifle.

However, to the crowd and to Levat, the most noteworthy witnesses were Dima's widowed daughter and Anov Seymour.

8

“Do you prefer that we call you Ms. Shrewdnikov or Madam Tshuva?” Letafel asked the newly arrived witness.

“Please, call me Tshuva. I loved my father very much, and part of me will always carry his name, but I am a Tshuva, now, even in death.”

“Thank you, Gele Tshuva, for being here today. Your testimony will be of the utmost importance to one of the most significant charges facing the defendant. If I may begin with my questioning,” the prosecutor paused to wait for an answer, and the witness nodded graciously. “Good. Is it true that your father, Dima, was carried back to your house on the first day of November in a casket by the church stewards that once followed Sergei Seymour?”

“Yes, that is true. And- “

“Is it true that the defendant later showed up at your house that same evening just as the sun was setting?”

“… Yes, that is also true.”

“Then, please enlighten us, why was the defendant paying you a visit at such an hour?”

“He came,” she paused to think, “he came with news. He came to tell everyone there that the town was planning something bad with Seymour’s body.”

“Everyone that was there? You mean to say that it was more than just you taking care of your father’s corpse?”

“My father wasn’t- “

“Were you the only person there, Madam?”

“No, no the Seymour church followers had stayed to help us with many of problems. They took great care of us.”

“But they abandoned you as soon as Levat arrived? He ordered them to start preparing for their heist that was to take place the next morning.”

“I don’t know anything about that,” she spoke hesitantly. “The stewards had taken care of all the chores for the day. They cut and stored enough wood for the next week. They were just getting ready to leave when Mr. Seymour knocked at our door.”

“I would like to point out, my fellow skeptics and countrymen, that the defendant knew exactly where to find his followers. He knew that they would be at the house of his most recent victim! How else would he have known where to find them if it was not already discussed among them that that is where they ought to meet. Where else would they be other than the house of his primary target at the recent funeral catastrophe? Can you provide any other explanation to these questions, Madam?”

Tshuva fidgeted uncomfortably. “I… I don’t know how he knew they were there.”

“They had been there all day, correct?”

“Almost.”

“Did any of them leave at any point during their stay?”

“No, they were all very busy! They never once slacked off.”

“If they had been there all day without any of them leaving to tell the defendant where they could meet, how is it then that he knew other than it was prearranged?”

“I… I don’t know, sir. I don’t know. But, the stewards, they were so kind.”

“Yes, I’m sure many of them felt great regret over the necessity to follow through with their harsh orders. Comforting and providing for you was their way of making up for what they did, not that taking the life of your father could ever actually be made up for.”

“But my father was alive.”

“I apologize, but that doesn’t match with the testimony of those who saw him in the hands of the stewards outside the church.”

“That was just in passing, Father was- “

“That’s all I have for now, cherished judge. I cede my time to the defense.”

The prosecutor sat down and took out his notebook as Levat rose and took his place as questioner.

“He doesn’t much like to let you finish a thought, does he?” he asked Tshuva.

The judge interrupted before anything else was said. “Keep the questions relevant, Seymour.”

Levat acquiesced and immediately fired away at the heart of the issue, “Mrs. Tshuva, was your father, Dima Shrewdnikov dead or alive on the evening of November 1st?”

“He was quite alive, sir. The church stewards brought him to me in the casket, but he was certainly alive. They took great care of him, gently placing him on his bed and tending to him with care, bringing him water and making better bread than I have ever been able to do by myself.”

“And what is it that happened when I knocked at your door, exactly?”

“Well, you knocked, and I have to admit, sir, that I was quite surprised, startled even. I was not expecting anyone else. However, when I opened up to you, you looked even more concerned than I. I had never seen you like that before, sir. You- “

“Can you provide any light as to why I may have been so, as you said, concerned?”

“You told everyone there that the town was ‘trying to make fools out of us.’”

“Are those the exact words that I used?”

“As far as I remember, yes.”

“What happened then, was your father still alive at this point?”

“Oh, yes, of course. You greeted him yourself, remember. You didn’t stay along though, as you said you and the stewards had stuff to attend to, and you left only shortly after getting there.”

“What did I say towards your father? Did he respond to me?”

“He responded, yes. You asked if he was ok and he groaned, nodding his head.”

“As you can see, ladies and gentlemen of the court, Dima Shrewdnikov was truly still alive after the funeral and even into that night. Mrs. Tshuva, when and how is it exactly that you found out about your father’s death?”

She readjusted herself in her chair. “My neighbor, Mr. Grevnik, asked me for my help so I visited his house. He didn’t ask for much, just that I load one of the bigger logs of wood into his furnace as he wasn’t able to himself. When I got back, Dad was… he was no longer there.”

Levat’s expression hardened. “I know it’s not comfortable for you, but please be more specific.” His eyes glared sharply and the jurors took note.

“He was dead, bleeding from the mouth.”

“At about what time did you find him like this?”

“It was late in the morning, not yet noon. It had to have been nearly 11.”

“Cherished townsfolk of Rassvet, precious jurors, as you can see, Dima was alive even until the chaos of the mob broke out on November 2nd. I’ll remind you that the mayor’s meeting began at half-past nine, and as the officials attested to, my official arrest took place about 3 hours later.” He tuned to the judge, “thank you” and returned to his seat.

“If I may,” the prosecutor stood once more, “I would like to pose one final question to the witness.” The judge begrudgingly allowed it, waving his hand towards Letafel. “Madam Tshuva, I ask myself why your father didn’t walk back to the house himself. I wonder why he was in a casket at all? If I may, when he was returned to you, what condition was he in? If he was alive, how was his health?”

“He… well, he was injured. That is why the stewards were so careful in moving him from the casket to his bed. He told me that he hurt badly around his hip.”

“Thank you. Finally, you can see that, even if he hadn’t died that same day, he had sustained an injury grave enough to take his life within the next 24 hours. This such mention is corroborated by the autopsy performed on the Shrewdnikov body, paid for, might I say, by the generosity of your very own mayor (he so clearly wishes to uncover the truth in this case). A man of such a sophisticated age as Dima could very easily die of a hip injury, even if not immediately. He obviously sustained this injury during the defendant’s funeral meeting, which was, as is already established, antagonized into a frenzy by the defendant himself, which led to Dima’s injury, which led to his death. Levat Seymour is nonetheless responsible for this tragedy.”

9

As Levat hoped, Anov was one of the last witnesses to be called. He was suspected of being incapable of carrying out an unbiased provision of the facts due to his relationship with Levat and his shared beliefs with the Seymour church, but he was present at not only each of the major incidents but also could provide context as to the situations behind them. Therefore, judge gave Anov his time despite the prosecution's objections. Levat believed that his questioning of Anov would be overwhelmingly in his favor, easily carrying enough weight to sway the jury's opinion of the case, even if they were skeptical of his potential biases.

After mounting in front of the crowd, Anov spoke briefly, open-handedly and unprompted, primarily of Levat's character. His words were plain but meaningful. He said on multiple occasions that his cousin "could not be blamed for the actions of the townspeople and certainly not for the death of Dima." He explained to the jury that Levat had always been harsh, even as a child, a story to which many of them could also testify. But he also said that, despite his pointed words, Levat cared deeply about Rassvet and about people in general. "He is no scoundrel," he announced. "What he wants most of all is that people be capable of seeking the Lord without getting in their own way."

Then the prosecutor took his place and began asking him questions about each of the events. He began with Levat's character, "You grew up with him, almost like a brother, so how can we trust that you have an unbiased opinion on the defendant?"

Upon the first question, Anov was already at a loss for words. He sat quietly for a moment preparing what he might say. "I quite like Levat. Would it not be unfair to like him if he were a bully? I know his heart, sir, and he means well, I promise."

“You believe he is incapable of inciting violence?”

“No, he is quite capable. But that is not what he wants.”

“Why do you speak of what he wants?”

“Because I know, sir.”

“If he is capable of stirring violence, and violence was in fact stirred at his word, isn’t it obvious, even to you, that it was indeed the defendant’s fault?”

“No, not at all. Would you blame a child for beating himself to death if all he really did was insult his father?”

“So, you admit that the defendant insulted the townspeople of Rassvet, including the mayor?”

Again, Anov paused, trying not to get distracted by all the people in the building. “Does the child’s words about the father have to be untrue in order to insult him?”

“Ok, Mr. Anov Seymour. What was it, in your opinion, that killed Dima?”

“I… I don’t know. It wasn’t Levat. He was injured when he was stripped out of Oreg’s and Domnikrov’s hands at the funeral—when he fell to the ground. How he died, I don’t know?”

“Why were your fellow church members holding him to begin with? We have heard testimony about them intending to take him outside to beat him for disrupting the service.”

“Did that testimony come from us?”

“I am not the one taking questions, Mr. Seymour.” Anov went quiet. He no longer had anything to say; he had been surprised by the prosecutor’s response. Letafel repeated his question, “Why were your church members holding Dima?”

“He did make a scene. He was very loud, as I remember. He also fell into the casket just beforehand. I felt so bad for him, I wanted to help him there, too, even before he fell.” Anov’s voice began to shake, “It would have been good to let him calm down outside. It would have been good to take him somewhere to care for him and whatever he may have hurt when he broke through the casket. It was not good to let him fall!”

Seeing the emotion well up inside his witness, the prosecutor decided to really push, hoping to be able to rally a favorable reaction out of Anov. He got loud. “Did the defendant shoot the rifle?”

Anov looked up at the fiery questioner, startled. “Eh, umm, yes.”

“Did he make a plan for the morning of November 2nd?”

“On… the second? The plan… a plan… yes.” His eyes began to water, and he was struggled to control himself.

“Where did he get the musket,” the prosector yelled. Anov jumped in his seat, looking down at the ground. “WHERE?”

“F-from… from me…”

“You gave it to him, confirm, yes or no. Yes, or no?”

Barely through his sobs could the audience hear a faint “yes.”

Letafel turned around to face the crowd, “There you have it, ladies and gentlemen. Little Anov here took the musket and gave it to his cousin who promptly fired it towards the crowd—towards the mayor. He didn’t even load it himself, the defendant didn’t. No rational person, as the defendant clearly is, who wasn’t looking to kill someone would treat a firearm with such

disrespect as to fire it unsafely, unsure if there was shot in it or not. Not only do we have an attempted assassination, but we also have a low-life accomplice!"

Just then the crowd in the room gasped as Anov burst out of the witness's stand straight towards the prosecutor. His footsteps were heavy, and he could only make out a water-blurred outline of his destination. He jumped towards Letafel, landing with his face stuffed into his back, his arms around him tightly. The prosecutor's reaction was instant. He tried to jerk himself around, but the weight of Anov's sagging mass wrapped around his waist prevented him from moving too quickly. Anov cried into the back of Letafel's suit.

Even the judge was stunned; he did not make a move to stop Anov. Even though his movements were quick, they nevertheless appeared uniquely gentle. Nobody read any malintent in them, and certainly not in Anov's face. The prosecutor and witness stood there in an awkward, one-sided embrace. "Ok, ok, get off of me," the prosecutor complained roughly. He pried at Anov's arms and hands, tearing them away from his attire. Indignant, he barked at Anov for disrupting his speech and failing to show proper respect to his case and the court.

Anov fell to his knees on the floor of the church, still whimpering to himself. The judge raised his hand to slow the anger of the prosecutor and asked the witness to return to the stage, but Anov didn't move. "It's okay, your honor," spoke Levat. He looked at his cousin and his own heart groaned to him. "I forgo my right to cross-examine the witness." Everyone in the room felt the compassion stirred in them as Levat did, at least for a moment. Anov was known to be an angel, but even this was unexpected.

The judge dismissed the witness and made a final summary of the day's events himself. He asked if there would be any more witnesses and neither the defense nor the prosecution brought

any more names forward. “In light of the rest of both the prosecution and the defense, I, serving as judge of this Levat Seymour trial, hereby dismiss you into the hands of our Lord. We will reconvene tomorrow morning at 10 for the final statements of the plaintiff and of the defendant, respectively.”

10

They tied Levat's hands together, and he was led out of the church building back to his cell. The rest of the attendees cleared out within a few minutes' delay. To the delight of many among them, however, their day was not yet over. Letafel caught up with the most recently dismissed witness, angrily calling his name from the moment he exited the church. He drew a great following behind him as he chased after Anov. Having just watched him fall apart during his interview, some were worried for the poor lad, while others were licking their lips in anticipation of what the prosecutor may do. He was still red from the embarrassment of his surprise and of the ease at which the judge quelled his rebellion against the witness. He mumbled insults to himself between shouts, trying to conjure the right words as he approached.

Anov turned around to face the prosector, his cheeks still wet. He raised a hand at his side to greet the vexed man, but his gesture was rapidly rejected. Letafel slapped the hand away and pushed his forehead into Anov's, forcing him backwards. Letafel was indeed convinced that Anov's actions during the court proceeding were childish and ridden with disrespect. The man who he had just publicly accused of being an accomplice to assassination stormed at him out of order, held him against his will, and did so in a way that made people pity the attacker, rather than the attacked.

Letafel's words were cruel and senseless. He was a completely different man than the one he portrayed during the trial. His inspiring and rational indictments had devolved into rash accusations. His words were nevertheless poignant, however, evoking such expressions that disparaged not only Anov, but also his origins stemming from his Seymour lineage all the way out to his broader community. The townspeople present at the spectacle were hardly pleased with

the prosecutor's insinuations about Rassvet. The haughtier of the group even flushed in anger. Anov's demeaner never altered, however. His grief flashed brightly in his swollen eyes, but his lips never quivered.

He only successfully backpedaled away from the forehead of his aggressor for about ten paces before he tripped. Anov stumbled onto his back, bringing the prosecutor down alongside him. They both fell into the muddy snow of the village path, but with the change in tone of Letafel's clamor, it seemed he had landed much harder than Anov. His thundering insults came to a halt and his hands instinctively drew up to inspect the pain above his right eye. A thin film of blood was smeared on his fingers. He had landed on a rock, breaking open a wound at the corner of his eyebrow. A weak trail of blood trickled down his face.

Anov's eyes fixed the injury intensely. Uninjured himself, he bound up to his knees and took his coat off to reach his thinner sublayer. For a moment, his bare chest fought the cold December air as he placed his shirt over Letafel's eye. Nobody else in the vicinity moved as the skin around Anov's boney upper body turned pink in the wind. When Letafel stood and refamiliarized himself with his environment, still holding the kind supporter's shirt to his eye, he realized who the source of his aid really was. His anger rekindled. Spitting on him, he proclaimed that Anov was "pigsty filth" and marched away from the crowd.

The rest of the evening, Anov spoke graciously with the people who had witnessed his bout with the prosecutor. The women expressed great sympathy over him, showering him with care. They were quickly followed by their husbands, brothers, and fathers, who likewise dealt with Anov approvingly, compassionately. He was asked a multitude of questions about what he thought of his cousin's situation, about whether he actually believed what he said about his character. To each question, Anov answered simply. He described the trial as "harsh" and the charges as

“poor” and “rotten.” When speaking of Levat, he further supported the characterization he gave in court. He never spoke anything bad about the prosecutor, even though the people tried to stoke the flames. He showed them instead that there was no fire against the man to be stoked at all.
“He took your shirt, he spat on you, he cursed your name and the name of your people,” someone began to speak to him.

“He cursed the name of Rassvet!” cried another.

“How is it that you still refuse to sour his name in return?”

At this question, Anov’s mind immediately flashed to a moment when Levat and his father had dealt with a similar sort of question. He remembered that his fiery cousin responded in a way that placed all the responsibility on the aggressor’s own head. “I don’t need to when he sours his own name,” he imagined him saying. Anov didn’t like that answer, though.

“It’s only that…” Anov stammered, “that he shouldn’t be sour. I wish that he wasn’t.”

Perplexed, the questioner pushed further. “What do you mean, ‘he shouldn’t be sour’? Are you blaming him for his attitude? Are you going to put him in his place?”

“No, I… I just- It’s not good that he’s upset like that.” Each person who heard his answer, or who asked a similar question and received it themselves, marveled. They read in Anov a genuine grace; his sorrow concerning the prosecutor spoke without guise nor ulterior motive. Many hugged him in reverence.

Each time that he was asked about his expectations for the following day, Anov responded vaguely, but hopefully. He didn’t know of any practical way to help Levat, but he could sense that the townspeople’s curiosity about the defendant was rising in a very positive way. “Do you

think he could actually win the case? The mayor is very serious about sending him away," said one of the older women with which Anov spoke. "Maybe I believe you, about what you say about your cousin, that he isn't guilty, but that hardly seems like it's going to change the outcome of this trial. Your cousin is defending himself, for god's sake. Why would he do such a thing?"

Anov's attention drug on the woman's words, three little words that he found uniquely captivating. "Yes, yes, perhaps it is for God's sake," he thought aloud. The lady didn't understand what he meant. She looked at him puzzled, and Anov returned the favor. "Why is he doing it? I can't really say. But… do you trust God?"

"Of course, how can I not. I would be stoned to death if I didn't."

"I know Levat trusts."

The lady's husband chimed in, "If you say, but I don't see how anyone so arrogant can say that they trust God." He had, up until that point, said very little to Anov, but it was nonetheless clear that he was more skeptical about the defendant than his wife.

"Is he on trial for the sin of pride?" Anov questioned?

"He is on trial because he thinks he can do whatever he wants. He thinks he is better than us."

"Hush, Freum," the lady said to her husband. "Can't you see you're upsetting dear Anov here?" The older man looked at the frailty of his conversational partner and softened himself.

"It's okay, madam," replied Anov with a gentle smile. "Even I'm not sure I can say that Levat doesn't have an arrogant side. But… in the trial… why… he could have…" He paused, trying to catch his breath and find the right words. "I didn't stay to help him."

The lady gasped, “yes, yes, you’re right! He let you leave! He didn’t question you. Maybe that could have helped him win!”

Hearing the words said out loud cut deep in Anov’s soul. He yelled, “I should have stayed; I so wanted to help him!”

The husband and wife were shocked by his sudden outburst of passion, but that shock quickly turned to inspiration for the woman. “It’s okay, Anov, I’m even more convinced now that your cousin is a good-spirited man. Don’t you see, Freumnikov, don’t you see?”

“See what,” the husband boasted, “Do I see the sentimentality invading our future generation?” The woman turned to face him, ready to ridicule him, but when she saw his face, she understood and touched her hands to his forearms crossed at his chest.

She returned her attention to Anov saying, “Don’t mind him, he believes you, too. Isn’t it like you said, Levat is trusting God.”

“I really think so, madam, now more than ever.”

And thus went many of Anov’s conversations throughout the evening. He spoke with the most simple to the most intelligent people of the town and left all of them impressed with his spirit. Each person who took it upon themselves to seriously investigate the youngest Seymour cousin came away seeing Levat less like the arrogant monster painted in the portrait of the prosecution and more like an honest attempt for nobility. Some of them even forgot their personal history with the late Sergei Seymour and viewed his death less as a personal insult and more as a pestilence to his only son.

11

Back in his cell, Levat couldn't get the image of Anov, kneeling before the prosecutor in tears, out of his head. He was sure that he was tormenting himself at that very moment over not staying to accept more questions. His heart was beating wildly, sending immense jolts of emotion to his head—confusing emotions, mixed together in the strongest, most frustrating concoction imaginable. He was grieved by the image of Anov's tears puddling on the floor of the church and by the idea of Anov regretting his decision to leave the trial. He knew that neither of their hearts could have taken it if he had stayed for more questions, but now he may have lost his ace. Despite this, Anov's care for the prosecutor, having brough him to the edge of hysteria after hearing him call him an accomplice (what kind of sick man conjures such connections), filled Levat with an inexplicable pleasure. He wanted to rejoice over the love that Anov brings. He felt as if he needed to sing and dance in the soft embrace of his God. His heart rent itself between his pride, his guilt for Anov's abuse, and the boundless love that nevertheless captured him. He couldn't speak, and he certainly couldn't sleep. He paced his cell in intense turbulence. He clenched his jaw until it hurt, restraining himself from shouting. He kicked the walls of his cell ruthlessly. He jumped up and down in occasional fits of jubilation. He spent the night in such a state that can only be described as perfervid, tumultuous meditation.

When the morning came, his exhaustion, although very present, didn't show through at all. His thoughts, still consumed in his questions about Anov, about himself, and about God, made him his body so stiff, his movements so tense and erratic, that the guards were at first frightened to approach him. But he was nevertheless put back in his place from just the day before at the church.

Levat didn't listen to a single word the prosecutor pronounced. He searched for Anov in the crowd but didn't find him. He didn't notice how full the building was; he never perceived the extra eyes peering at him through the windows on his left and right. He had no other interest apart from seeking that love that obsessed him.

The crowd, too, was hardly moved by the prosecutor. He spoke clearly, professionally, and inspirationally, even more so than he did on the previous day. He drew in the testimonies and supplied evidence to his conclusions seamlessly. His choice of words was daring and artistic, and his structure was perfect. He let nothing slip through the cracks; every possible reason to find Levat guilty on each of the charges was explained—no—realized with immaculate precision. But his fracas with Anov and his shameless insinuations about the poor quality of Rassvet and her people still pricked like thorns in the minds of the crowd. He had turned his audience against himself outside of the trial, and Anov had solidified their faith in Levat. All the defendant had to do was claim innocence with even the slightest bit of realism, which, given the circumstances and the claims of the charges, was going to be child's play for him. It would be harder to push a 3-legged hound from a spinning log.

When the Letafel had finished and the judge called him up to present, however, Levat sat still. He hadn't heard the judge, he hadn't even noticed that the prosecutor was no longer speaking. "Levat Seymour," the judge called again. "Levat Seymour, please come present your closing arguments." After his polite and redundant calls had taken no effect, the judge stood and yelled "Seymour!" as he approached the defendant's seat.

Levat's attention finally focused, and he slowly raised his head towards the judge. Silently, he acquiesced. He made no hurry to take his place; his movements were slow and tedious. As he

took his place as presenter in the room, his eyes pointed towards the jury, but he didn't look at them. In the faintest of voices, he mumbled to himself, "Where's Anov?"

Nobody heard him, not even those who were closest. Some saw his mouth move, however, and a thick silence took over the court. Levat quickly extended his arms out by his sides and let them drop back down and slam into his legs. He had given up. "I can't," he announced. "There is nothing to be done. Do you all see me? I know you see me. Do you see me here, standing like a man? Well forget it! There is nothing I can do. The perversions are too great; I'm crushed! There is no strength in this world that can save me." Levat's words appeared meaningless. He seemed to speak at random, degrading his passions and efforts. His subject—his source—was unknown to the crowd, and they began to worry that his words may be interpreted as an admission of guilt. "It's criminal!" Levat shouted. "We are all criminals, and there is nothing! No number of trials or punishments that could set us straight. We are each criminal, all of us, including me, maybe even especially me." The prosecutor's eyes flashed with greed and a smile came over his face as he watched the reactions of the jurors. His smile attracted Levat's attention, however.

"No, you, especially," Levat thought aloud, turning his body to face Letafel. "Out of everyone in this room, you—you sir of the people, representative of Rassvet, of the mayor—you are the most criminal." The judge went to interrupt the disruptive assertions about the prosecutor, but Levat spoke over him in the start of a panicked frenzy, "Where is Anov! Where is the light of this town? No, where is the light of this world, of this species? Anov!"

"Mr. Seymour, for the sake of the reputation of this court and of the outcome of your case, I implore you to speak with relevance and discernment. Contain your passions, sir," the judge said.

“You yearn for relevance? For discernment?” Levat reposted. “That is exactly what I will give you.” He turned back to face the audience, “I am sick! Punish me for my incredulity and wickedness. Punish me for ever counting myself above someone else! Anov! Where is my—our—Anov? Have you seen him? No, no, of course you haven’t seen him, you don’t know what he looks like. None of you have seen his beauty, none of you have seen his love and passion. There is nobody else like Anov, what a perfect creation so obviously handcrafted by God Himself. Why do you not see the world as he does? Why do we make the earth stink with corruption, yet he only sees what is righteous and heavenly? Sickness and perversion, me, you, him,” he pointed at the Letafel, “that is all we are. Why are we not like Anov!” At first, the audience was irregularly confused, but they wanted to trust the speaker, and leaned forward each time Anov’s name was mentioned. The once boisterous Levat sank down on himself and hung his head between his knees as he sat on the floor.

“It’s not good,” he whimpered. “It’s not good, it’s not good to not be like him. God, help us. Where is Anov’s grace? Why is there such a holy creature among our putridness? Why can’t we be like him!” Levat, the strong, able bodied, respected, witty, and dauntless man, began to cry at his trial. “Why can’t we be like him? Where is our strength? We hide, I hide, I hide behind… behind what? Behind myself? What foolishness? What a fool, I am! Anov is the only one who doesn’t hide, so where is he?” He raised his head back to face the audience, his eyes red, his tears reflecting the morning sunlight entering through the church windows. “Did you see what he did, do you see what he does? There is nobody, nobody else willing to love like him. He has loved his whole life. He’s the most beautiful thing any of us has ever set eyes on, and here we are holding some, some forsaken trial! Where is Anov! Why don’t we find him! Why don’t we invite him in to talk to us? We need him to talk to us! We are cursed without such beauty! Invite

him in! Invite him in! I can see it, you do not have Anov! You don't know him! I have spent my entire life around him, and even I have been too foolish to invite him in!"

The audience was stunned by Levat's passion and exposure. Nobody understood what he was saying, but they didn't care. So many of them had been made susceptible to the handsomeness of Anov's character, and with every question, every statement that Levat made about his cousin, the crowd remembered what they had seen. They remembered the boy's earnestness, how he was wrought with care. They remembered this from the spectacle on the previous day, and they remembered this from the many other moments they had been blessed by him in the past. The ladies wept in heartache and the men, too, felt bereaved. It was as if Levat was redescribing to them their first love that had been ripped away from them. It was as if he was pointing at where the ignoble people of Rassvet could find it again.

"Why should we go on as we are? Why should we torment poor Anov any more than we already have? Why should we not bear ourselves to him, like him? Where even is our such likeness? If you know where Anov might be, if you know what he may look like, why risk keeping him hidden? Do you not know what we may lose?"

Eventually, Levat's exhaustion took him over and he sat. He sat, first, in the floor again, facing the audience, but this time wordless. He requited his time. The anticipation for the outcome dissipated. Many among those gathered for the trial were too overwhelmed to consider what Levat's testimony might mean for the decision of the jury. Those who maintained a sense about them, however, did know. They knew that what Levat had done was likely to give Letafel a great victory; they could already see the contentment on the prosecutor's face. But this also added to their faith in Levat's words.

The judge announced the time for deliberation, and the jurors departed. They were gone for less than an hour. Not even the effects of many people's tears had completely vanished by the time they had reached a final decision. They returned, single file, back to their seats after entering through the main church doors and walking past everyone in the building. The judge followed behind them and after each of the jurors were respectfully settled, he took his own his place as speaker in the place where Sergie Seymour once gave his sermons and announced the result of the verdict.

"This court acknowledges the gravity of this case, and wishes to assure you, cherished public, that the jury's deliberation process has been remarkably thorough. I commend them for their diligent service. As of today, the 17th day of December, a unanimous decision was made on the grounds of the trial of Levat Seymour. For all charges, including public disturbance, inciting violence, heresy, attempted assassination of a public official, and murder, the defendant is found guilty. I hereby sentence him to permanent exile from Rassvet and imprisonment in the North-Damish Labor Encampment. The court is now dismissed."

Epilogue

The mayor of Rassvet had insisted, for matters of security and efficacy of deliberation, that those who claim to belong to the Seymour Church group and any past witnesses interviewed during the trial be barred from entering on the day of reckoning. Each of them, however, including Anov, awaited the decision from immediately outside the church doors. A strong commotion was stirred amongst the people as the judge announced the sentence and Levat was taken back into custody. The Rassvet officers bound his hands with a thick, coarse rope, as was tradition, and pushed him out the door ahead of the audience, who followed closely. As soon as Levat stepped foot outside, his eyes finally settled on his dearest cousin. Tears welled up a second time.

“Anov!” Levat shouted. He reacted so abruptly, so strongly despite his fatigue, that he tore away from the two guards holding him, burning their hands as the rope slid through them against their will. He ran violently to his cousin and fell at his feet. “Thank you! Thank you!” he cried, almost as if praying. Anov remained silent. Looking at his elder cousin supplicating on his knees in front of him, he saw something in his eyes that he had never seen before, and his heart leaped for it. Anov had always looked up to Levat, but the strength in him that he admired appeared different now, and it was different in a way that cast exaltation into Anov’s soul.

The guards picked Levat up from the ground and better secured their grip on him. They were relentless and savage in their efforts to assert control. But as Levat’s gaze departed from Anov’s, great peace abounded in them both. Anov stood still, his head tilted up towards the sky. Nobody around him questioned it, and nobody from the trial left to follow Levat. Everyone’s attention was fixed on Anov as he peered into the heavens.

He regarded the sky blankly. It was the subject of his eyes' focus, but it was not what he was perceiving. His vision, so to speak, was overwhelmed by Levat's image, of the last image that he saw of him. It burst out to him in magnificent grandeur. The brown snow under Levat's knees was as a rainbow and his cousin's grateful words flew to him with wings of white. The tears streaming down his face changed to great cascades of powerful water that touched everything in sight. In the midst of it all, however, Anov noticed a small izba: the Seymour izba sitting out in the pasture. It called to him with his own voice, and Levat—the Levat that he hadn't ever seen until that very moment—stepped out of the door.

Suddenly, the young Seymour relaxed his head and regarded the townspeople. Smiling, he turned and walked slowly, assuredly, across the pasture neighboring the church. The people followed him. They walked in a quiet unison until they reached the remains of the old Seymour family home where Anov immediately set himself to work. He walked over to the burned izba and picked up one of the detached pieces of charred wood. As he carried it back into the empty field, the people watched with great curiosity. One-by-one, they joined him. They picked the loose rubble away from the foundation and took it to the pile that Anov had started. They had immediately found what remained of Sergei Seymour's bones, and they swept away the loose ash around them. They finished digging the grave site just outside the household and Anov, all without asking, watched as the townspeople gently moved his uncle's remains into their proper resting place.

Each day after, masses of people joined Anov back at the ashes of the Seymour izba. They removed the furnace, sorted out all the charred wood, and dug out the partially buried logs used as a foundation. By the time the town celebrated Christmas, the site was again barren. The area wasn't left with a single stain leftover from the fire. It was ready for a new build.